On Cheryl Misak’s Modest Pragmatism

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This article examines Cheryl Misak’s “modest” version of pragmatism. One of the advantages Misak sees in this position is that it addresses the deficiencies she finds in the work of writers such as Habermas and Rorty. Focusing on her reformulation of Peirce’s account of truth, I argue that Misak has not succeeded in identifying a position which is modest in the sense she claims. I suggest further that Misak’s objections to Habermas’ Kantian pragmatism should lead her to share the unqualified acceptance of contingency she thinks characteristic of “radical” pragmatists.

1. Introduction

Disagreement about the meaning of pragmatism has characterised it from its earliest years. Peirce hoped that his work would aid the natural sciences by clarifying the concepts scientists use in the course of their investigations. In contrast, James focused on the role pragmatism might play in all areas of human life, seeing it in particular as a way of reconciling science with religious belief. James was excited by what he saw as the radical potential of his philosophy, going so far as to express the hope that pragmatism might become a movement with consequences comparable in significance to those of the Protestant Reformation.1 For his part, Peirce was sceptical of the radical aspirations of some pragmatists, and regarded versions such as that of James to have fallen away from the sober insights of his own position.

In 1908, Arthur Lovejoy was able to discriminate thirteen versions of pragmatism, and a century later its diversity appears considerably greater.2 In the light of the number of philosophers who either identify as pragmatists or have been associated with pragmatism, it is natural that attempts have been made to take account of this diversity. These attempts often follow Peirce by contrasting his formulations of pragmatism with the apparent deficiencies of Jamesian and Deweyan varieties.3 This is the approach adopted by Cheryl Misak. Misak draws on elements in Peirce’s work in order to develop what she describes as a desirably “modest” form of pragmatism.4 This she sets against the problems of Jürgen Habermas’ Kantian pragmatism on the one hand, and of what she thinks the radicalism of writers such as Richard Rorty on the other.5 She claims that pragmatists should have no truck with the aspiration to justify beliefs and practices by means of transcendental argument, yet at the same
time thinks that we might draw upon the resources present within our social practices in order to move beyond the kind of ethnocentrism proposed by Rorty. Specifically, these practices are said to provide for a substantive account of truth. Misak rejects transcendental and metaphysical theories of truth but also argues that if we inspect our practices, we nevertheless find robust standards of truth and objectivity operating there. As she remarks, “The trail of the human serpent is over everything (to use James’ phrase), but (as James himself may or may not have seen) this does not toss us into a sea of arbitrariness, where there is no truth or where truth varies from person to person or culture to culture.”

I argue that Misak is unsuccessful in identifying a position which is modest in the sense she claims. I begin by examining her most important contribution to pragmatism, her reworking of Peirce’s account of truth into an understanding of truth as indefeasibility. Contrary to what Misak claims, I argue that the idea of indefeasibility does not take us further than the general pragmatist commitment to fallibilism and open-mindedness. I then suggest that Misak’s occasionally expressed willingness to side with Rorty’s wholehearted acceptance of contingency is the correct insight to take from pragmatism, and that it should not be thought threatening once it is seen that the apparent dangers of radical pragmatism are not in fact present.

2. Misak’s account of truth as indefeasibility

In *The American Pragmatists* and other important work, Misak takes pragmatists to be in broad agreement in giving up on many of the assumptions of modern philosophy. Pragmatists accept that there is no bedrock upon which to anchor belief; they set aside “the idea that we might find a foundation for our principles of right belief and of right action in some infallible source – from God, from some special faculty of intuition, or from what is given to us with certainty by experience.” Once this step is taken, however, a danger threatens, which is that “the source for, and the status of, our judgements, theories, and principles is altogether human and therefore arbitrary.”

In Misak’s presentation, one of the advantages of pragmatism is that it enables us to embrace anti-foundationalism while at the same time avoiding this unfortunate consequence by drawing on the conceptual resources present within our social practices.

Identifying such a position is not easy, however. If we accept that epistemic foundations are not available, Misak claims that we become tempted to make one of two errors. One is that, despite declaring for anti-foundationalism, we go on tacitly to re-introduce supposedly “neutral standards” in order to justify our practices. Misak thinks this is the case with Jürgen Habermas’ Kantian pragmatism. Habermas is said to err by failing to take seriously the practices within which we find ourselves, but that had he done so, he would not feel the need to attempt to support those practices by reference to transcendentalism. In contrast, some of those who successfully reject “neutral standards” are said by Misak to commit their own error, recoiling from the absence of such standards to claim that there are “no-standards-at-all.” While she believes Rorty correct to argue that neutral standards are not available, Misak takes